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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ASHKELON DESALINATION PLANT OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Sensitive but unclassified, please handle accordingly.

1. (U) Summary: The Ashkelon desalination plant began providing potable water for the Israeli national water grid in mid-August, according to Gustavo Kronenberg, general manager of the private consortium that built and is operating the plant. By the end of this year, Ashkelon, the largest reverse osmosis desalination plant in the world, will provide about 100 million cubic meters (MCM) annually, approximately 15 percent of Israeli household consumption. The cost of the desalinated water is about US \$0.53 per cubic meter. The plant is a potential source of supplemental water supplies for Gaza. End summary.

2. (U) TDY Deptoff met August 29 at the Ashkelon desalination plant with Gustavo Kronenberg, general manager of VID Desalination Company Ltd. VID is a consortium of three companies: IDE Technologies, Veolia Water, and Elran Infrastructures. VID will operate the Ashkelon facility for 25 years, including the construction period, before turning it over to the GOI. Kronenberg said that Ashkelon consists of two plants, the North and the South, each with a full production capacity of 60 million cubic meters (MCM) per year. At the time of the visit, the North plant was producing 7,164 cubic meters per hour, which, if sustained, would be a yearly rate of almost 63 MCM. Kronenberg said that the South plant is scheduled to become operational in November or December. According to Kronenberg, the contract with the GOI is for 100 MCM per year, at a price of about US \$0.53 per cubic meter, but production could be expanded to 120 MCM per year. He added that the GOI would have to renegotiate the price for any water over the contracted volume with VID.

3. (SBU) When asked about press reports that adding Ashkelon water to the more saline national grid water would cause de-scaling of the distribution pipes, resulting in "red water" being delivered to consumers, Kronenberg said the issue was more political than scientific. He explained that any discoloration of the water would be short-lived, "a few hours at most", a common occurrence when pipes are flushed, and not a health concern. Kronenberg said that Mekorot, the Israeli National Water Company, raised the issue as a way of publicly demonstrating that they had some control over the Ashkelon project. According to Kronenberg, once Ashkelon was ready to start producing water, Mekorot insisted they needed four days to study the red-water issue. Kronenberg agreed to pump the desalinated water into a holding reservoir for ground-water recharge for four days, after which Mekorot agreed to accept the water. (Note: There have been no press reports of "red water" since Mekorot began mixing the Ashkelon water with the national grid water two weeks ago. End note).

4. (SBU) A formal opening ceremony for the Ashkelon plant is scheduled for

September 28. Kronenberg said he expects Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, Vice Premier Peres, acting Finance Minister Olmert, and Infrastructure Minister Ben-Eliezer to attend the ceremony. Invitations have also been extended to American Embassy personnel.

15. (SBU) In past conversations with Emboffs, Kronenberg has noted that the Ashkelon plant could be built out to its full 120 MCM capacity to provide supplemental water supplies for Gaza, if there were interest.

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